

POPULAR LECTURES

ON

THEOSOPHY

BY

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II. The Ladder of Lives

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The Ladder of Lives

FRIENDS :

I begin to-day the first of the special departments into which I have divided the whole large subject of Theosophy, and I have called it "The Ladder of Lives". I propose to run over what science would call the scheme of evolution ; but this scheme is much larger from the Theosophical standpoint than it is from the standpoint of the ordinary western Science. Western Science, observing phenomena, only starts in the middle of evolution, and so needs a motive power which shall make evolution possible, a reason which shall explain its method and its significance. The larger science, Occult Science, takes in the whole of the vast series of changes which begin with the descent of Spirit to embody itself in matter, traces

the evolution of forms through stages of ever-increasing beauty, complexity and capacity, so that, within all, the evolving involved life is seen. I have called these stages, these grades, "The Ladder of Lives". These living forms occupy successive steps on the ladder, from the mineral to the throne of the Logos Himself. It is a veritable Jacob's Ladder, with its foot in the mire of earth and its highest point lost in the divine Glory. The Hierarchies of living things are the rungs of the ladder, from the dust to the mightiest Archangel or Deva. One of those Hierarchies is the human, some way up the ladder. The method of the climbing we shall study later.

It is clear that in this, as in all other sciences, there must be certain great conceptions, mother-ideas, vital and productive. These may be disentangled from the vast mass of details filling up the master-thoughts, and these can be placed clearly before the mind of any one who is willing to exercise a certain amount of patience and sustained thought. On the other hand, there is a vast mass of details filling up these huge conceptions, and the mastery of that vast mass of details means the devotion of a whole life to a small portion of the mass. The case is exactly the same with Theosophical teaching. There are certain great conceptions of evolution that I propose to try to put before you this afternoon. My hope

is that this outline will inspire some of you with the wish to know more ; this 'knowing more' can only be attained by individual study. I shall give you the outline, and you must fill up this outline by study with all the details that make every part of the outline intelligible. I do not pretend that I can give you in the short compass of a lecture the details, which are indefinite in number and almost infinite in complexity. All I can do is to trace out the broad lines for your guidance. A popular lecture can merely trace out the principal ideas, and lay before your minds in succession certain clearly definite conceptions. No lecture can take the place of study. People who learn only by attending lectures can never possess more than a superficial knowledge of a subject. Only a student can master the difficulties of any subject by individual and strenuous exertion. Hence when I have done my work, your work remains for you to do. If you find the conceptions fascinating, as many of us have found them, then must follow the study which will make those conceptions real to yourselves.

First, then, let us try to study a great conception of the Matter side of the world, the conception of the Solar System. I draw as if it were a circle within which is the 'universe of discourse'—as the logicians say ; my universe of discourse is our own Solar System, outside which we

shall not go. Both nature and our own life must ever remain unintelligible unless we take into account worlds other than the physical, and Theosophical concepts must remain unintelligible if we try to present them as limited to the physical world, in which we are living; for this physical world is interpenetrated and interwoven with other worlds, and in these interwoven worlds we are all living all the time. Man is not a denizen of one world only, but, in the early stages of his evolution, of three actively and of more passively.

Let us think of the Solar System as a sphere, or ovoid, a large but circumscribed portion of space, filled in the beginning—ere the planets come into existence—with tenuous homogeneous matter,¹ interstellar matter, the matter of space. It is within this great circle of the Solar System that the creative, preservative and regenerative power of God is to guide His creatures from the dust to the height of divinity. Herein is our Ladder of Lives, up which we are in thought, in some sense, to climb.

The matter of our system, with its various densities, is the result of the first creative act, wrought on the homogeneous matter of space, and this creative act prepares the Field of Evolution, as I have sometimes called it. Matter now exists—

¹ 'Homogeneous' to us, with our limited powers of perception.

as you know from your own experience in the physical world—in various forms, or states. Suppose I have an orange in my hand; you can see the solid matter, as the rind; the liquid matter, as the juice; and though you are not able to see the air, the gaseous part, you know that it is there, interpenetrating the solid and the liquid; and you know also that all three are interpenetrated by ether. Similarly if I could hold the Solar System as a ball in my hand, we might see these states of matter existing therein, interpenetrating each other; everywhere physical matter, and that interpenetrated with finer, being to it as the liquid to the solid; that again interpenetrated with yet finer, typified by the gaseous, and that again with ether. Here we go a step further than the science of the day is as yet prepared to go. Science recognises the existence of ether, it being a necessary hypothesis to account for light, etc., but it does not yet subdivide it into various densities. It studies the modes of motion in the ether, and gives them various names, as the forces or energies of nature. It recognises that there are different modes of motion, but not that these are in different densities of etheric matter. In the ether there *are* different densities—different as solid and liquid are different—and these yield what we call electricity, sound, light, heat, and so on. (I am not forgetting that science calls sound vibrations of air, but those are secondary.)

There is one density of ether the motion of which is the kind of electricity by which a tram-car moves, the vibrations of which kill a human body. In that same kind of ether are the vibrations of sound which set the air-waves going which are sound. Another density of ether is thrown into the vibrations we call light, and by these you see. There are others yet which are recognised as the swift and short waves which give the finer forms of electricity. There is a yet finer, subtler, form of ether the vibrations of which are the media for transmission of thoughts from brain to brain. Matter, in states related to each other as are the familiar states of our own world, filled up the whole of our Solar System in mighty interpenetrating spheres, ere the planets came into existence. All these spheres are material, and are cognisable by organs of perception composed of their own elements. Think then of this Solar System as composed of matter, existing in various stages of density; all the investigations into the nature of matter, into the nature of the atom—not only of the physical world but of all the other great spheres as well—must be carried on by suitable organs and instruments. Here comes in the endless complexity of detail that would need years of lives, of many lives, to exhaust. But now, how does this matter of many densities come into being? According to the Theosophical view that Life is primary and matter secondary,

the divine Life forms the motive power in every atom of matter throughout the Solar System. The first mighty Wave of Life poured into the ocean of interstellar matter came forth from God—as the Christian would say; from the third Logos—as the Theosophist would say; from Brahmā—as the Hindūs would say; from the “Spirit of God moving on the face of the waters”—as the Hebrew would say; from the Creator—as the Muhammadan would say. You may think of it as rolling round a mighty circle, descending from the zenith to the nadir, ascending from the nadir to the zenith again. This vast Wave of Life wells forth from the Logos Himself thrilling through the whole Solar System, breaking itself into endless fragments—as the smooth current dashing itself over a precipice breaks into myriads of separate drops—in order to become the life-atoms called matter. There is not one atom, one particle of matter, that has not the life of God as its life. There is nothing that is dead. This vast Wave rolling through the ocean of homogeneous matter crystallises, as it were, the matter into atoms, and becomes the Spirit in every particle of matter; and of this living matter the worlds are built. Hence we sometimes speak of what science calls matter as spirit-matter, as Spirit made manifest. There is not one particle that is only matter, nor can Spirit manifest itself without matter as its vehicle. Matter is the necessary vehicle

of manifestation for Spirit ; Spirit and matter are the first pair ; neither can exist without the other, for the divine Life only becomes Spirit when it ensouls matter.

That is the first creative action, the first Life-Wave. Having formed the atoms, it draws them together, and builds up the numerous aggregations of the various types of atoms, and these, in our physical world, are called elements¹. These elements are the basic materials for the building of all forms.

It is interesting to notice how our most advanced scientists are beginning to recognise the presence of life in all matter, and use such phrases as the 'diseases of metals,' their 'fatigue,' their susceptibility to poisons and intoxicants. It has been proved that the life in metals and plants responds similarly to similar stimuli as does the life in animals and man. I saw these responses in London, demonstrated by the great Indian chemist Dr. Jagadīsh Chandra Bose ; you may remember that he closed his noble lecture to a London scientific audience with the declaration that he had only proved experimentally the great truth which his ancestors had proclaimed thousands of years before, when they chanted the Vedas : "There is only one Life, though men name it variously." This one Life,

¹ See *Occult Chemistry* for the details of this building in the physical world.

poured out into the universe, ensouls the matter out of which all forms are to be made. This is the first root-conception to be grasped and remembered. It shows us the Logos as the Master-BUILDER, the Great Architect of the Universe.

A second great Wave of Life comes forth from the Logos, the Logos in a new aspect, that of the builder and maintainer of forms—the second Logos, we Theosophists say; Viṣṇu, the Hindūs name Him. That great Life-Wave again rolls round; from the zenith to the nadir, it gives characteristics or qualities to matter, qualities which enable it to answer in different ways to different stimuli from outside; thus to one kind of atom and its aggregations the speciality of answering to changes of thought, to another of response to changes of emotion and desire, and so on. The varying powers of each atom and its aggregations are given by the Life-Wave on its downward sweep, until it reaches the lowest point of its huge circle; then it turns to climb upwards from nadir to zenith. In the upward climbing the Life-Wave begins the building of forms out of the matter now showing the qualities that it has imparted on the downward sweep. This matter, now showing qualities, powers of response, *i.e.*, of internal rearrangement under the impact of stimuli, is drawn together and aggregated into forms—mineral, vegetable and animal forms, and lastly forms of animal-man. The work

of the upward sweep is the building of forms, as the work of the downward sweep is the giving of qualities. This is the second root-conception. It shows us the Logos as the Master-Craftsman, and as He ever works by number and by geometrical designs, He reveals Himself as the Great Geometrician of the universe.¹

We come to the third and last great Wave of Life. There are five spheres, or planes, which make the Field of Evolution. Beyond these in rarest subtlest matter and in splendor of radiant unimaginable Life, in the highest sphere, dwells in the perfection of His own nature the Lord of the system, whom the Hindū calls Īshvara, the Lord, impartite, unmanifest. In the second sphere His Aspects shine out, His manifested Powers, whom we called the Logoi from whom the Life-Waves came, Powers which build matter and forms, and the Power, the Regenerative, from whom the third Life-Wave is to come. In that lofty sphere naught may live that is not God, and there are the seeds of Divinity, parts of Himself, emanations—if the word may be used of those who dwell ever in the bosom of the Father—which are to be human Spirits in the field of evolution, the spheres of form. These are to be rayed down thereinto; for the very purpose of the building of

¹ "God geometrises," said Plato.

the worlds is that these Seeds of Divinity may grow through the many forms of the various kingdoms, until they stand revealed, the triumphant Sons of God, reflecting the splendor whence they came. Has it not been said in the East: "Thou art Brahman"? Has it not been said in the West: "Be ye perfect, even as your Father in heaven is perfect"? So splendid is the object of human evolution; man is a Seed of God, which shall grow, when sown in the soil of earth, into the likeness of God.

The third great Wave of Life consists of these human Spirits, which are sent to ensoul and utilise the bodies which have been prepared for them through the ages, through the long evolution, the slow climbing, from mineral to plant, from plant to animal, from animal to animal-man. Then there dawns at last the morning when the human-divine Spirits that have been waiting the time for their advent, hover over the forms that are preparing for them; they are as yet unable to influence them, unable to guide, and unable to control. They form the third great Wave of Life that is poured out into the worlds. This is the third root conception. Out of the Most High the wave rolls downwards into the forms prepared for its coming.

The first Life-Wave, then, made the matter. The second Life-Wave gave the qualities and built the forms. The third Life-Wave brought upon its crest

the fragments of Divinity to ensoul the forms and to make them tabernacles worthy of God.

Think of this as of a great picture. The Holy Spirit, the third Person of the Christian Trinity, Brahmā, the Third Logos, is as a river which breaks itself into drops by the force of its descent; so the Life of God is poured out and scatters into atoms ensouled by Himself. The Life of Viṣṇu, the second Person of the Christian Trinity, the Wisdom, builds the forms "mightily and sweetly ordering all things"; and the first Person, the Father of the Christian, the Shiva or Mahādeva, of the Hindū, the Liberator, is the pourer out of the human Spirits.

We will not deal now further with the first outpouring, the creative aspect, for this in its details would require that study of many lives to which I alluded at the beginning. We will consider instead the second outpouring, in the upward sweep of which is formed the Ladder of Lives, that ladder up which every one of us must climb, up which each of us has climbed a long way, must climb the remainder.

The second Life-Wave, as we have seen, gave characteristics or qualities to matter, imparting to its compounds and aggregations the capacity to answer to different moods of consciousness. In the three lower spheres, we have first that which Clifford, ahead of his time, called 'Mind-stuff'—

that is the stuff the vibrations of which are correlated with changes of thought. Next the matter the vibrations of which respond to emotional changes, those of sensation, feeling, passion, desire. Such types of matter are not yet recognised by modern science. Then further down—out of the desire-sphere into the physical sphere—our physical world, where matter is already evolved to the point where it can respond by means of external action to the promptings of thought and desire. Changes of vibration in the material vehicle answer every change of consciousness, whether of thought or desire, the change in consciousness and the vibration in matter being linked in inseparable conjunction.

The great work of building up bodies begins with the mineral kingdom, through metals, stones, and what is known usually as inorganic matter. The crust of the earth is rich in stores of this nature, and here is where the first efforts of building begin. Then we pass on to crystals which show out more powers of the organising life, and then by slow steps to the crystalloids found in plants, more plastic, and scarcely either vegetable or mineral. Then through a realm which is neither vegetable nor animal, but lies at the root of both—the Monista; from this branch out the two great evolutions of the vegetable and animal kingdoms. Well-developed members of the

vegetable kingdom, as forest trees, are higher in evolution than many forms of animal life.

Now in the mineral kingdom all the lessons impressed on gross matter have to be given very roughly in order to cause the life within to respond. Earthquakes upheave the surface, volcanos throw out great liquid masses, the sea dashes itself against the rocks and hurls stones together, until they are pulverised into the minutest sand. In this dense mineral kingdom this rough treatment from outside has the purpose of awakening a response from the dormant life within. In the Middle Ages a wise Sūfī Teacher said: "God sleeps in the mineral". And indeed life is not yet ready to turn outwards, to look through its sheath; the one purpose of these violent impacts is to wake up the sleeping Spirit. The mineral kingdom shows many grades of growth and of advance. When the soft iron moves towards the magnet, or another metal moves away from it, you have indications of those faint thrillings of the primary attraction and repulsion which hereafter will show forth as love and hate. You have a response from within to that which is contacted without. This is found everywhere, and the more close the study the more clear the result. After countless ages of similar and repeated impressions, the fragments of living matter give undoubted proof of response from

within to stimulus from without.

For a long time science thought that life and consciousness were products of matter; but science has of late changed, for it has come to realise that it is not the organ which makes the function, but the function which creates the organ. When we study a fragment of living matter, of protoplasm, such as the amœba, there is no mouth to take in food, no eyes for vision, no lungs for respiration, no heart to drive the nourishing fluid through the body, no hands with which to grasp, no feet with which to move. There is only craving, desire, and desire builds the form, as it seeks gropingly its own gratification. In the Ancient Scriptures has it not been said? "The Aṭmā desired to see; the eye. To hear; the ear. To think; the mind." The mouth was formed by the craving of the life within for nourishment. The craving was there; so the body at first wrapped itself about the object which touched it, taking it in; this, repeated over and over again, at last formed a depression, a buccal cavity, and a tube for passage through the body, and thus gradually the mouth and alimentary system grew into organisation; the complex organisation grew out of the simple desire of the life. So again living matter desired to move; it put out a little bit of its body in the desired direction and pulled the body up to it, and this,

repeated innumerable times through myriads of examples, produced the leg and the foot for the purpose of locomotion. As matter becomes more and more ductile, the requisite organs are fashioned more and more suitably in response to the inherent requirements of the life. Schopenhauer's "Will to live" lies at the back of evolution, and implies the Will of the Spirit to make to itself a vehicle, and to shape the organs it requires for self-expression as the life unfolds.

One stream of life, for instance, develops herbs, shrubs, trees—in the last of which we can see the first dawning signs of mind-consciousness appear. The constant repetition of the seasons, bringing similar and long-continued stimuli year after year, produces finally a remembrance of the past similar experiences, and out of that an expectation of the next member of the oft-repeated series. Memory begins to stir, and when a living thing begins to remember the past, it also inevitably begins to expect the future. The experiences of the tree are repeated year after year, season after season, the rise of the sap, the putting on of leaves, the heat of the sun, the drenching rain, the alternations of light and darkness, heat and cold, the resistance of the roots and branches to wind and storm, the falling of the leaves, the running down of the sap, the period of inactivity in the cold of winter. All this repeated for ages

rouses in the tree the incipient signs of memory, of anticipation, *i.e.*, the dawning of mind-consciousness.

So scientists who are botanists are talking of the eyes of plants, which enable them to choose particular places of growth and so on for suckers. Still one must realise that the type of consciousness existing in the vegetable kingdom is different from and far lower than that found in the animal kingdom. These two lines of consciousness in the vegetable and the animal exist side by side, and it may well be that consciousness can climb so high in the vegetable kingdom, that when it passes over into animal forms it would by no means enter at the bottom but relatively high in the animal ascent. Let us take this ascent as though it were successive—which it is *not*, and this is also shown in Haeckel's *Genealogy of Man*—for this does not touch the argument. When the power of moving from place to place is enjoyed by a living creature, its opportunities of gathering experience largely increase, for now it brings itself into contact with outer objects and does not merely respond when they come to it; thereby its 'awareness' develops more and more rapidly. It is by the struggle for existence, by the tremendous competition in nature for food, that the animal develops the qualities which serve for the bringing up and protection of its young; through its many vicissitudes, by hunting and being hunted, it develops foresight, craft, cunning, powers of self-defence, bravery, and even

higher qualities, which will eventually make possible the coming of man.

But even when animal-man appears on the stage of life, there is yet something wanting, something lacking for real Manhood.

It is that third Wave of Life, it is the bringing down of those Spirits which have been waiting to take up their habitation in the forms that have been prepared for their reception, now the animal-man. These forms are naturally crude and rough at first, but they are suitable for the first efforts of the forming Spirit, to evolve the man from the savage to the divine state. He is now on the first human rung of the Ladder of Lives ; the Hierarchy of Man begins to manifest. He will gradually pass out of savagery into a low state of civilisation, and will then slowly climb, step by step into a higher. And here a problem arises: What is the method of this advance? There is no apparent reason why a savage should pass from the stage of savagery into that of civilisation, or again why a civilisation which has reached a high state should become disorganised and relapse into savagery. Yet these things happen and there must be a cause. The causes will be dealt with in a subsequent lecture.

Let us now consider the main stages of the unfolding of consciousness which mark the steps on the Ladder of Lives occupied by the Hierarchy of Man—once more the broad outlines only, with in-

finite variety of detail within each class. The steps are four, so well described by Patañjali. You may find each type among your own acquaintances.

I. The mind is sufficiently developed to be alert, but is continually changing the object of its attention ;: first one thing attracts it, then that is dropped and another becomes the sole delight, and so on and on. It is the mind in the child-stage of its long unfolding, and each new toy is eagerly grasped. Patañjali aptly terms it the "Butterfly mind," for the mind, like a butterfly, darts from flower to flower, hovers dancing in the air, with no stable purpose guiding its flights. Such is the child-mind in many grown-up bodies, awake to the world around it, but not yet brought under obedience by its owner, the Spirit.

II. The child-mind grows into the mind of the youth, full of surging emotions. Ideals begin to attract, but there is little stability or clear understanding. It is full of hasty impulses, irrationalised longings, confused and bewildered thoughts. It is the stage of confusion, of illusions, of glamor, the "confused mind" of Patañjali.

III. Then follows the stage of the man, whose mind is dominated by a fixed idea; it may be ambition, philanthropy, patriotism, love of truth. The idea may be of different kinds, but it grips the man. All he does, all he thinks, all he aims at, is subservient to it. If it is ambition, he chooses his

friends as they can serve his object; he plans, schemes, toils, all with the one object of gaining power. If gripped by patriotism, he becomes a hero; if by love of truth, in troublous times, a martyr. No reason, no argument, no persuasion, no appeals to the ordinary motives that sway men can divert him from his purpose. I came across such a man in America, dominated by the idea of geometrical forms and their uses; he could think of, talk of, nothing else. Such a one, says Patañjali is becoming fit for Yoga.

IV. In the fourth stage the idea no longer obsesses the man, but the man becomes master of the idea, the idea becomes his servant. With all the concentration of will and purpose gained in the third stage, he is now able to choose his object and direct his forces to its realisation. Only when this stage is reached, can a man make real progress in the higher life, the life which reaches human perfection. The hero or the martyr can now become the Saint, the Seer, the Portal of Initiation is before him.

Now he passes through that Portal and climbs the remaining human rungs of the Ladder with ever-increasing swiftness, until he stands at the threshold of superhuman progress, reaches the side of those lofty Beings whom we call Masters, and becomes the Perfect Man. Then before him opens out another and more splendid evolution;

high above him on the Ladder stand the super-human Hierarchies in dazzling splendor, and, almost lost in light, stand the Christs, the Buddhas, the Manus, of past ages. Would he stand where They are standing? He might leave the world and stand in glorious strength and dignity among the Hierarchies of living Beings that rule and guide the worlds, and dwell in the vast fields of space. Great and mighty are They, and wonderful and necessary Their work. But if he would climb to the loftiest rung open to our humanity, then he must not quit the world, whose sorrowful cries have spurred him to his upward way. "Canst thou forget compassion?" whispers the Voice of the Silence. So He returns again across the gulf, wears yet the fetters of the flesh, the burden of gross matter, and gives Himself to be a Savior of man, a Guardian of Humanity. He climbs the rungs of the Ladder to the height of the Bodhisattva, the Christ, the Buddha, until he vanishes in the Glory, to return again, perhaps, in some future world, as an Avatāra, a divine Incarnation.

Such is the Ladder of Lives, as seen from our earth and the worlds interlinked with it. On some of the rungs of that Ladder we all are standing, you and I, every one of us, whatever we may be. Many a rung lies below us; many a rung lies above us. We may be climbing slowly or rapidly;

there is time enough for all, for the veriest laggard, there is power enough for each, for in the heart of each is God. There is nothing that can change our ultimate destiny, nothing which can finally frustrate the will of the God within. We may play in the meadows of life like children, and linger long in "the primrose paths of pleasure," but the God within cannot be finally denied. He is very patient, because He is eternal, and because He is omnipotent in power. His will is unchangeable and sure, and He is our innermost Self; hence the destiny of man is certain, and, as I told you last Sunday, it is Purity and Bliss.

Some of you have dreamed of endless suffering, of endless sin, and have writhed under the nightmare of an everlasting hell. But God is everywhere; His Essence is Joy and Light and Love, and there is no such thing in His Being as unending evil and unending sorrow.

But you must climb the Ladder for yourselves, and if you delay too unreasonably, if you try not to climb at all, you may so retard the course of your evolution that you will be unfitted for the upward-climbing race of which you are apart; and then will come friction, then pain, and your sluggish vehicles will clash with the more evolved vehicles around you, and the God in you will manifest as pain and suffering and not as joy. You may even delay so long as to unfit yourself to

go on with your race, and you may drop out of the present evolution and sleep through long ages. But at last, at last, your lower nature will learn its lesson, and set itself in harmony with the inner.

Truly is there much to climb, yet Life is endless. Truly we stand at many stages, yet Life is one. And because the Life in all is one, therefore we all are brethren.

